PROCESS FOR HIGH STRENGTH, HIGH CONDUCTIVITY COPPER ALLOY OF CU-NI-SI GROUP

FIELD OF INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to precipitation hardening alloys and, in particular, to a process for manufacturing high strength, high conductivity copper alloys of the Cu-Ni-Si group.

BACKGROUND

[0002] One type of precipitation hardening copper alloy is the copper-nickel-silicon alloy with a nominal 2% nickel, 0.45% silicon and remainder copper. This alloy combines excellent stress relaxation resistance with high strength and high conductivity. The combination of strength, formability and conductivity is reached through a thermo-mechanical process combining cold deformation and heat treatments.

[0003] In order to obtain high electrical conductivity, it is necessary to have a high degree of precipitation of the alloy elements. The size and fraction of the precipitates are also important for the resulting microstructure and consequently for the mechanical properties. A dispersion of fine precipitates can retard recrystallization or hinder grain growth and also increase the strength. Depending on the size and amount of precipitates, different combinations of properties are achieved.

<u>Example 1</u>

[0004] An example of a typical process for forming copper-nickel-silicon alloys is casting, hot rolling, cold rolling, solution annealing, cold rolling, and

final precipitation annealing. The precipitation annealing is typically done in a batch type furnace at a temperature between 390°C and 460°C for four to eight hours. The expected properties are a yield strength above 80 ksi in combination with an electrical conductivity above 40% IACS (IACS stands for International Annealed Copper Standard where pure copper has an electrical conductivity of 100%).

[0005] In Example 1, a copper alloy that was formed with the typical process set forth above was precipitation annealed in a batch furnace for four hours at temperatures between 390°C and 430°C using a cooling rate to 300°C of 30-50°C/hour. The result after annealing is shown in Fig. 1. The alloy reached a yield strength between 94 to 97 ksi with an electrical conductivity of approximately 43% IACS.

<u>Example 2</u>

[0006] A copper alloy formed with the typical process described above in connection with Example 1 was precipitation annealed in a batch furnace for eight hours at temperatures between 425°C and 460°C using a cooling rate to 300°C of 30-50°C/hour. The result after annealing is shown in Fig. 2. The yield strength for the material decreased with increasing temperature from about 93 ksi to 79 ksi. At the same time, the electrical conductivity increased from 45 to 58% IACS. As shown in this figure, it was not possible to reach a combination of a yield strength above 90 ksi with an electrical conductivity above 50% IACS.

[0007] Accordingly, there is a need for a process capable of producing a copper-nickel-silicon alloy having a yield strength above 90 ksi with an electrical conductivity above 50% IACS.

SUMMARY

[0008] The present invention meets the above-described need by providing a process for producing a copper-nickel-silicon alloy having a yield strength above 90 ksi with an electrical conductivity above 50% IACS.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] The invention is illustrated in the drawings in which like reference characters designate the same or similar parts throughout the figures of which:

Figure 1 is a graph showing the yield strength and conductivity for known material that was precipitation annealed in a batch furnace for four hours at different temperatures;

Figure 2 is a graph showing the yield strength and conductivity for known material that was precipitation annealed in a batch furnace for eight hours at different temperatures;

Figure 3 is a graph showing the yield strength and conductivity for material that was manufactured by the process of the present invention;

Figure 4 is a graph showing the yield strength and conductivity for material that was manufactured by the

process of the present invention;

Figure 5 shows in block diagram the initial processing of a copper alloy containing nickel and silicon in accordance with the invention;

Figure 6 shows in block diagram an alternative for initial processing of the copper alloy for high strength and high electrical conductivity; and

Figure 7 shows in block diagram the final processes for producing the inventive copper alloy.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0010] Precipitation hardening copper alloys are used to achieve a combination of high strength, high electrical conductivity and good formability. The present invention will be described in connection with a copper-nickel-silicon alloy having minimum 99.5% content by weight of Cu, Ni, Si, and P. The balance of the alloy includes inevitable impurities. The nickel comprises from 1-3% of the alloy. The silicon comprises 0.2-0.7% of the alloy, and phosphorous comprises a maximum of 0.010%.

[0011] Referring to Figs. 5-7, the alloy of the present invention is produced through a combination of cold deformation and heat treatments. In one example of the initial processing shown in Fig. 5, the alloy is first cast 10 into an ingot. The ingot is then hot rolled 14 into a strip. The strip is then cold rolled in a first cold rolling step 16 prior to solution annealing 18. After solution annealing 18, the strip is cold rolled in a second cold rolling step 20.

[0012] The above steps are an example of initial processing prior to precipitation annealing 22. As will be evident to those of ordinary skill in the art, some of the steps above may be omitted or their sequence altered. For instance, hot rolling 14 is not required if the strip is continuously cast. Also, the strip may be formed by other heat treatments such as extrusion. In addition, the present invention applies to alloys that are initially cast into a rod or wire form prior to being rolled into a strip. Also, the end product may be wire.

[0013] In order to produce an alloy having the desired strength, there should be at least one cold deformation step, however, additional steps may be added as shown in Fig. 5. Also, the solution annealing 18 may be conducted in two steps.

[0014] Turning to Fig. 6, another example of the initial processing is provided. In the first step, the alloy is continuously cast 50. In contrast, the alloy could be cast and then hot rolled as described previously. In the first cold deformation step 52, the alloy is deformed by at least 80%. The alloy is then solution annealed 54 to a grain size of maximum 0.015 mm in combination with an electrical conductivity of max 26% IACS. Next, the alloy is cold deformed in step 56 between 10 to 50% prior to the precipitation annealing 22 (Fig. 5).

[0015] Turning to Fig. 7, the last step is precipitation annealing 22 followed by a cooling period 24. The precipitation annealing 30 is described in

greater detail below in connection with the following example.

Example 3

[0016] A copper-nickel-silicon alloy formed by the above-described process was precipitation annealed in a batch furnace for eight hours at temperatures between 470°C and 490°C. After annealing, the material was cooled to about 300°C at a cooling rate of 10-20°C/hour. The results are shown in Fig. 3. The electrical conductivity was above 50% IACS for all temperatures, but the yield strength reached a peak above 90 ksi at approximately 480°C.

[0017] Accordingly, the temperature for precipitation annealing and the cooling rate enabled a strip to achieve a combination of strength and conductivity that was not possible in Examples 1 and 2.

Example 4

[0018] A copper-nickel-silicon alloy formed by the above-described process was precipitation annealed in a batch furnace for 4, 8, and 10 hours at a temperature of 480°C. After annealing the material was cooled to about 300°C at a very slow rate of 10-20°C/hour. The result after annealing is shown in Fig. 4. As shown, 4 hours appears to be a lower limit for reaching the desired conductivity.

[0019] While the invention has been described in connection with certain embodiments, it is not intended to limit the scope of the invention to the particular

forms set forth, but, on the contrary, it is intended to cover such alternatives, modifications, and equivalents as may be included within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.